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Clark Column: Both Deer Hunters and Deer Threatened by Lack of Action on CWD

Like every other deer hunter, I'm excited about the opening weekend of the nine-day season and glad to finally see cold weather in the forecast. But underneath one of our greatest outdoor traditions lies the possibility of what my son has called the coming "zombie apocalypse" for whitetail deer. While most deer experts won't use words like zombie apocalypse when talking about Chronic Wasting Disease, what they are saying about it seems every bit as scary.

Chronic wasting disease (CWD) is a transmissible spongiform encephalopathy (TSE) that infects white-tailed deer, mule deer, elk, and moose. TSEs are caused by mal-formed proteins called prions. The scary thing about prions is that they can persist indefinitely and for all practical purposes they appear to be indestructible. New research even suggests they may be able to be taken up and passed on to other wildlife through plants.

CWD was first diagnosed in 1978 in Colorado and has since spread to a dozen states and provinces. Nowhere however has the rate of spread of CWD been faster and of a greater magnitude than in Wisconsin.

CWD was first detected in 2001 in Iowa County. Since then, in just over a decade, the area of CWD infection has spread to 18 southern counties, along with "satellite" outbreaks in Juneau, Adams, Portage and Washburn counties.

In the center of the disease outbreak more than one in three adult male deer (>33%) are now infected. The rapid rate of spread and the increased prevalence of CWD in Wisconsin is unprecedented in North America.

Dr. David Clausen, a veterinarian and former member of Wisconsin's Natural Resources Board, has been deeply worried by the rapid spread of CWD and has warned of what will come of our failure to address the challenge.

According to Clausen, *"About the only protection against CWD is to keep deer populations low and under control. If you have high concentrations of deer and CWD gets into that herd, Wisconsin proved things can get scary much faster than people – and wildlife agencies – care to admit. **No hunting tradition can last long once CWD starts spreading the way it is now in parts of Wisconsin.**"*

"We might not be able to stop it (CWD) from spreading, but we can slow it. We need to increase restrictions on (deer and elk) farms, reduce wild herds significantly, conduct targeted removal of deer in known CWD areas, and ban baiting and feeding of deer and elk nationwide."

Unfortunately, that's not our current policy. Dr. James Kroll, the Texas "deer trustee" hired by Governor Walker didn't believe the data indicating CWD has been spreading exponentially, and he didn't think we should do much of anything to slow the spread. In his Deer Trustee Report he stated, "We believe it is time to consider a more passive approach to CWD in the Deer Management Zone. We feel that time is NOW!"

Let's get passive – NOW! Wow, talk about a call to action.

We just hired the one deer expert who doesn't believe CWD is a big problem, and his opinion has found its way into the equally passive Deer Trustee Report Rules Package proposed by the DNR for implementation next year.

Eradicating CWD in the original outbreak area once it was identified was never realistic – we got there too late. But there are a lot of options that lie between eradication and doing nothing. By working aggressively to slow the spread, and attempting to eradicate local outbreaks far removed from the main infection as soon as they are detected, we can buy time until more effective control measures become available.

Ultimately the issue has come down to politics. Our governor and many legislators have pandered to the minority of angry hunters who don't trust the DNR by legislating wildlife policy out from under the agency and the Conservation Congress, and banning effective hunting regulations like Earn-A-Buck or early doe-only seasons.

We're about to find out what happens when "social and political factors" trump established science and the willingness to make hard choices. This is not just about hunters - every citizen in Wisconsin should be worried about the threat to deer and people posed by CWD.

The public comment period on the DNR's proposed deer trustee rules package is still open. Please contact my office for more details at (608) 266-7746 or rep.clark@legis.wi.gov

As always, it's an honor to serve as your State Representative.

Fred Clark

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